

Election FOCUS 2004

May 21, 2004

U.S. Department of State

ISSUE 1 • NO 11

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FAST FACTS:

- ✓ **There will be 15,000 press passes given out for the 2004 Democratic National Convention.**

Media and the 2004 Election



President Bush responds to reporters during a press conference in the White House Briefing Room. Monday July 8, 2002. (AP Photo/Doug Mills)

Today's modern mass media reach hundreds of millions of people in the U.S. and throughout the world through television, radio, newspapers, magazines, books, film and the Internet. The American news media inform their audiences about the candidates, their positions on the issues, opinion polls, political debates and conventions, and political advertisements. The news media provide a watchdog mechanism for the public, work as a liaison between the public and its leaders, and influence candidate images and reputations.

Among the various mass media, television is the most important provider of election media coverage. According to CNN, by 2000, 98 percent of all American households owned a minimum of one television set. Television has become the dominant source of political news for the American public.

The Campaign Trail

The way television media cover candidates has changed dramatically. In the past media coverage of presidential candidates restricted itself mostly to candidates' official duties and activities. Now candidates invite reporters to experience the daily

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Presidential Election Media Coverage: An Interview with John King

In a recent interview, John King, CNN's senior White House correspondent, spoke with Washington File staff writer Darlisa Crawford about his role in reporting on U.S. presidential activities in an election year. King has covered four U.S. presidential elections for a number of news organizations, including CNN and The Associated Press.

Q: What is the most important role of the media in a presidential election?

King: The most important role is to objectively observe and report on the positions the candidates take in the election, and hopefully as well to report fairly on what the voters view as the

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life of the campaign trail, personalizing the candidates to a greater degree than before. Interviews with candidates in their homes or in the studio, and televised dinners with the candidates and local families provide the public information about the issues and candidates in a more personal manner.

The Hearst-Argyle television network received the University of Southern California-Annenberg School's Walter Cronkite Award for Excellence in Television Political Journalism for coverage of the 2000 and 2002 elections. Hearst-Argyle's political programming consisted of 200 cumulative hours on local, state and national campaigns. Currently, the network provides viewers "truth checks" of political advertisements and web sites dedicated to political information. During the 2004 primary season, a one-hour special, *On the Campaign Trail*, offered profiles on the private lives of Democratic presidential candidates. For example, it showed Senator Joseph Lieberman doing his laundry, General Wesley Clark's exercise routine and Senator John Edwards riding a campaign bus with his two children.

The American public's appetite for campaign coverage intensifies with each election year and the media's embrace of new technologies. Traditionally, candidates have used buses on the campaign trail. In recent years, as election coverage has expanded, CNN and ABC News have introduced their own high-technology buses equipped with mobile television studios and news bureaus on

the campaign trail. CNN's bus is called "Election Express." ABC News recently started using three similar vehicles.

"We have devoted a lot of effort to get people to understand that the buses aren't a gimmick," ABC News political director Mark Helprin said. "They allow us to do better journalism."

The New York Times recently commented on how technology is reshaping the work of correspondents and the media's coverage of campaigns. "Campaign reporters, like war correspondents, are not necessarily gadget geeks. But the rapacious 24-hour news cycle has forced them onto the cutting edge to do their jobs better -- or at least faster. The equipment is even altering the shape of the correspondent's day, which now includes scrolling in the morning through *The Note*, an online political briefing from ABC News, and checking one another's Web sites at night, trying all the while to get a jump on everyone else."

Political Advertisements

"Political advertising is now the major means by which candidates for the presidency communicate their messages to voters," wrote Dr. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania and Director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center. "As a conduit of this advertising, television attracts both more candidate dollars and more audience attention than radio or print."

By 1980 the 60-second political advertisement or "spot" had replaced

the half-hour broadcast speech, delivered by presidential candidates since 1952. The standard length of a political spot in 2004 is 30 seconds. According to Jamieson, the spot ad is the most used and the most viewed of all available forms of advertising.

Political spots create name recognition, ask questions a candidate views as central to the election, personalize current issues, communicate a candidate's talents and agendas for the future, and attack a candidate's opponent's perceived fatal flaws. Some political scholars suggest that political advertisements provide the electorate with more information than network news because of voters' tendencies to watch 30-second political advertisements that reinforce existing dispositions.

"If I had a choice between watching what you typically see in news about campaigns and typical ads, I would watch the typical ad," said Jamieson. "And I'd watch it back to back, so I'd watch both candidates' advertising because in the give and take of advertising, you're likely to get more policy content than you are in the typical newscast—too much of the news about campaigns tells us about the tactics, and the game, and the polls, and who's ahead and why, and too little about what these people have promised and what these people have done."

The Center for Media and Public Affairs, a nonpartisan research and educational organization, reported that the cost of political advertisements on television, the third highest source of ad revenues for the industry, has more than



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The U.S. Department of State is pleased to present its election coverage newsletter, **Election Focus 2004**. The newsletter will provide non-partisan coverage of the U.S. election process, featuring articles, interviews, public opinion polls, and other information on the presidential primaries, debates, conventions and campaign activities of the major presidential candidates.

Election Focus 2004 is produced by the Democracy and Human Rights team in the Bureau of International Information Programs.

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quadrupled since 1982. Candidates spent more than \$1 billion on political advertisements in the 2002 election cycle. Alliance for Better Campaigns, a public interest group that seeks to improve U.S. elections by promoting campaigns in which the most useful information reaches the greatest number of citizens, has concluded that ad prices at 40 stations around the country increased by more than 50 percent in the two months before the 2002 elections.

According to TNS Media Intelligence/Campaign Media Analysis Group data, the Bush-Cheney campaign has spent approximately \$56.7 million to broadcast 13 spots on television stations in 100 markets of battleground states. The research concludes that 63 percent or \$36 million has been spent to air seven “negative” ads.

In recent months, a number of tax-exempt political organizations, known as “527 groups” after a provision in the tax code, have been formed to raise money in support of issues that play to Senator Kerry’s advantage. By law, these groups work independently from the Kerry campaign. (Supporters of President Bush have also organized such groups to a significantly lesser extent.) According to USA today, 527 groups, such as MoveOn.org Voter Fund and The Media Fund, have spent approximately \$30 million on television advertisements. University of Missouri-Columbia data reported that an estimated 84 percent of the statements in those 527 groups’ 50 spots have been attacks targeted at President Bush. These spots combined with the Kerry campaign’s five negative ads that have aired on cable channels total more than \$40 million spent on negative advertising to date.

“There’s an interesting synergy in politics that occurs because the press focuses on attack in advertising,” remarked Jamieson. “As a result, the

consultant, knowing that the press is going to focus more closely on the attack ad is more likely to carefully document the attack ad. So the level of inaccuracy in the attack ad is actually, on average, lower than it is in the contrast ad or the advocacy ad.”

There are several types of political ads: negative ads—ads that are “as much or more about your opponent than you”, biographic and vision ads—”ads that describe or emphasize the candidate’s life or ‘vision’ for America”, issue ads—”ads that discuss one or more specific issues and the candidate’s proposals about them” and trust ads—”ads that seek to convince voters that the candidate is someone they can trust to lead them during challenging times.”

Tailored spots for specific local regions are also evident. For example, a recent series of Bush-Cheney campaign ads made mention of specific weapons systems—supposedly opposed by Kerry. The Arizona version mentioned Apache helicopters, Tomahawk cruise missiles and F-18 aircraft “all built here in Arizona.” Arizona was among nine states that carried different state-specific versions of the same spot.

CNN reported that some of the 527 groups advertised anti-Bush spots in 38 markets of the 39 markets the Kerry campaign targeted and 15 markets of the 41 markets the Bush-Cheney campaign targeted, according to the Republican National Committee.

“I would expect Bush’s ‘positive’ percentage (of ads) to go up some and Kerry’s ‘negative’ percentage to rise a bit,” said University of Missouri-Columbia communications professor William Benoit. “But Kerry’s only likely to go really negative if he gets well behind in the polls.” ■

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Presidential Election Media Coverage: An Interview with John King

biggest issues; often Washington is focused on things that in small town America are not as relevant and we should be careful not to take Washington’s perspective as the country’s perspective.

Q: How do you balance the media’s role on elections and its responsibility to the public?

King: I think that they are the same thing. One of the troubling trends in our business in part because of where I work (24-hour cable) is that there are a lot of “shout shows,” people screaming at each other on television. There is a lot more opinion on the air as part of what is framed as mainstream journalism. We are supposed to drive the middle of the road and not pick sides, to be objective. That’s what I have to try to do every day. So, you are serving the public by telling them what’s going on. You are serving the public by telling them what the president is doing, why the president might be doing that, where is he today, what does Senator Kerry say about what the president says. Bring it all together and just tell. Tell what they say. Don’t try to tell people what to do. Don’t try to influence people. That’s not our job. Our job is to share information and do it to the best that we can.

Q: How do you identify election stories and election issues for your news stories?

King: It varies widely. Sometimes what the president focuses on is the focus of my story on any given day and sometimes it will be what Senator

Kerry or whoever the challenger in any given election brings up. I like to go to communities and ask "normal people," as I call them, what they think. In most cases the issues are fairly obvious; this year the war on terrorism and in Iraq and the economy are the dominant themes. But we should also look for smaller "niche" issues that could be important in certain key areas. The debate over trade and "outsourcing," for example, is a subset of the economic debate that is very important in many of the major presidential battleground states.

Q: How has the Internet influenced coverage of this presidential election and the race in general?

King: Technology allows the media to communicate more conveniently with people. To those people that use it anyway, it is more convenient. You send an email instead of writing a card. You send money on the Internet instead of going to a fundraiser or answering a direct mail pledge, but some of it is new money. How much of it is new money? They will study that after the election and figure that out.

I think that you can overrate the Internet. Largely it is a way to communicate to the people that you already have with you. It's a campaign club. Instead of coming into your living room, you meet them on the Internet. You communicate with like-minded people more than you get new people, I think. However, for the small percentage of undecided voters, that ten percent, if they are looking to do research on candidates, it is much more accessible now. You can get it so easily that I think that helps both campaigns.

Q: What has been the most significant change in presidential election media coverage?

"The great advantage of covering a presidential election is getting to access the candidates and a chance to see how they hold up under a very stressful and demanding schedule."

— John King

King: Live television and the cable news networks are the most substantial changes in the last 20 years. Candidates are now trying to drive the coverage throughout the day, for better or worse. There are more platforms for campaign surrogates and other interested parties to air their views. From an information standpoint, it is a great blessing, but it can also be "loud" and crowded, if you will. But more information is always preferable to less.

Q: How does this presidential election differ from the elections that you have covered in the past?

King: This is the first one where the United States actually has 100,000 plus troops overseas, some of them getting shot at every day. So the United States is in the middle of a real war. If my memory is right, some of this stuff was going on in Kosovo, but it wasn't like this. Kosovo was in the air. So you have kids on the ground getting shot at every day, people questioning whether it was right or wrong to go to war in the first place, and you have sort of an "iffy" economy. So you've got two big things. Most elections are about one big thing.

You are lucky if the election is about one big thing because that gives you something to write about. So this is a challenging time and of course it's the election after the last one in 2000 when the country was split right down the middle. The courts decided the election. You have an incredibly polarized public.

Today 45 percent of the people are going to vote for Bush and 45 percent of the people are going to vote against him. That's just done. There is almost nothing that can happen, even though there are still seven months to the election. There is almost nothing that can happen to change those people's minds. That is how polarized the country is. It is very strange to have that dynamic in which you've got two huge things, a war and an economy. You also have a completely polarized country in which they are going to spend hundreds of millions of dollars over about 10 to 12 percent of the American people. That's whom they are fighting for. The other people have made up their mind.

Now it is not quite that simple in the sense that there are 45 who are with you no matter what and there are 45 who are against you no matter what. Let's assume you split what's left, the ten percent that's left. Well then who is going to win? The guy who gets most of his 45 percent to show up will win. That's the nuts and bolts of elections. Actually convincing people don't just be for me, be late to work to vote for me. Harangue your neighbor and get him or her to vote for me. That stuff fascinates me. Especially in an age where there is so much competition with cable, noise, radio noise, Internet noise, work noise, the pace of life noise.

Q: What is the greatest advantage and disadvantage in covering a presidential election?

King: The great advantage of cover-

ing a presidential election is getting to access the candidates and a chance to see how they hold up under a very stressful and demanding schedule. You also tend to see corners of the country

that you might never encounter otherwise. Whether it is the biggest cities or, as the president did recently on his bus tour, tiny rural farm towns, in those places you see how people respond to

the candidates. In my view there is no disadvantage; you are always tired and sometimes lose track of the calendar or what town you are in, but that is the beauty of a long campaign. ■

The opinions expressed in this article are those of the interviewee and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Government.

Campaign★Highlight

Monitoring Media Coverage of Elections

Americans rely heavily on the mainstream media for information, especially during election campaigns. Consequently, these media organizations have considerable influence on how people think about the candidates and the issues. This raises an important question: Are the media presenting a fair and balanced picture? A number of non-governmental organizations have been created to look into that question.

Some of these organizations closely monitor mainstream news coverage of the electoral campaigns and advertise their findings in an attempt to hold news executives to higher standards of coverage. The organizations advocate standards of reporting that are democratic, truthful and issues-oriented. They emphasize the media's responsibility to educate voters about the democratic process, devote more air-time to diverse political perspectives, and provide more thorough coverage of the issues and candidates on the ballot. According to the polling organization Pew Research Center for the People, forty-two percent of Americans go to local TV news for their campaign coverage. However, MediaTenor, a global provider of international media content analysis, reported that in January 2004, less than 5 percent of

network reporting covered candidates' positions on issues that matter to Americans most.

"Pre-election news coverage of the candidates has in many cases all but disappeared," says Paul Taylor, chairman of the Alliance for Better Campaigns, an organization that advocates improved media coverage of campaigns. "What little candidate coverage that remains is devoted to incumbents, by a margin of nearly five to one, over challengers."

Data from the Norman Lear Center, a multidisciplinary research and public policy center, revealed that the amount of election coverage provided by the typical local television station during the height of the 2000 presidential primary season was just 39 seconds a night, considerably shorter than the five-minute standard advocated by a 1998 presidential advisory commission led by former Vice President Al Gore. According to The Center for Media and Public Affairs, a nonpartisan research and educational organization, the total minutes of coverage of the 2002 midterm election on the national network news programs declined by 78 percent over the coverage those networks devoted to the 1998 midterm

election. The less media coverage a broadcaster dedicates to a political race, the more candidates must rely on buying media time to get their message across to voters.

Currently each news organization has its own rules for election coverage. MediaChannel, a nonprofit, public interest web site dedicated to global media issues, and its affiliate advisors are now drafting universal standards in collaboration with selected news services. They are hoping that these standards will eventually be adopted by the industry as a whole.

Media coverage is often the primary source of political information for citizens. Therefore, the role of the media in covering campaigns and elections is a critical element in the process of electing a U.S. president. The responsibility of the media to provide accurate and sufficient information to voters is paramount. Dr. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania and Director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center concluded, "Reporters should help the public make sense of competing political arguments by defining terms, filling in needed information, assessing the accuracy of the evidence being offered, and relating the claims and counterclaims to the probable impact of the proposed policies on citizens and the country." ■